



F Post
4-22-75

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Truth and security, a delicate balance

This country is currently engaged in an orgy of airing in public the somewhat tawdry linen of its espionage and intelligence apparatus.

It could only happen in America, and maybe a couple of other democracies. And for all the distress it may be causing many people, both in and out of the government, it has to happen once in a while if we are to continue to be able to call ourselves a democracy.

A blue-ribbon panel is looking more or less searchingly into the activities of the CIA over the past decade or so. There are charges that the agency illegally spied on civilians active in the antiwar movement and that in its rightful sphere of operations, foreign intelligence, among other things it plotted the assassination of certain heads of state, though apparently none of the plots was carried out.

It has been revealed that the CIA maintained "covers" on the mail of thousands of Americans and that in some cases, including one congresswoman, correspondence was illegally opened and the contents copied.

There is much more, some of it involving the FBI and Internal Revenue Service: illegal wiretaps, attempts to infiltrate certain groups, blackmail of politicians, etc.

The latest sensation was the revelation that the CIA spent \$350 million to raise part of a sunken Soviet submarine in the Pacific, and interestingly enough there was more concern in Congress over the cost of the project than over the fact that the secret was exposed in the press.

The significance of all this is not to be found in the actual revelations themselves, in the extent of this country's intelligence operations, in their successes or excesses.

It is the fact that despite the kind of world we have been living in throughout the cold war era, the United States has preserved a pretty fair balance between human freedom and the governmental secrecy necessary for national security in that world.

The truth — or some of it — eventually comes out in a democracy. At least some of the excesses and mistakes are exposed, and presumably we learn something from them. If nothing else, we have been shown once again the fundamental difference between ourselves and our ideological adversaries.

While the headlines blazoned the story of the submarine all over America, the Soviet press, which exists solely as an arm of the government, was forced to remain absolutely silent.

The Russian citizen had never been told of the loss of the submarine, and never will be told. It is doubtful if the families of the 70 drowned seamen ever learned what happened to them, and not because any real matters of security were involved (the Soviets don't even report commercial airplane accidents).

Because he is kept in ignorance of what his government does, the Soviet citizen is spared a lot of worry. But he pays a terribly high price for that kind of bliss.

Truth is always hard to find, and sometimes even harder to live with. But it remains our greatest strength and most potent weapon.

The fact that the very term "illegal," which implies a standard of legality to measure it against, is still operative in this country suggests that we are still a healthy distance from totalitarianism. Can anyone imagine the head of the Kremlin's KGB being called to defend himself before the Russian counterpart of a congressional committee?

If the Founding Fathers could come back today, they would be less astonished to learn that the government they established has sometimes abused its powers than that after nearly 200 years Americans still place the highest premium on truthfulness and open dealing, still demand the highest standards of conduct on the part of their leaders — in short, still cherish freedom.